



Greetings from the Black River State Forest! This is the second in what will be a year long series of articles celebrating 50 years of the Black River State Forest. This month's article is about the history of the property.

When early settlers came to the Black River area they were amazed by a seemingly endless sea of pine trees. Large stands of old growth white and red pine covered much of what is today the State and County Forests. Individual pines sometimes were as large as six feet across the base. In 1819 the first loggers came to the Black River area. Large sawmills soon followed and by the 1870's more than a billion board feet of lumber were being cut annually. From the time of Black River Falls' founding in 1839 up until 1889 logging was the area's largest industry.

By the 1890's most of the timber in the area was cut with no provision for regenerating the cut over land. Vast acreages once covered with towering pines were reduced to a barren looking wasteland. The federal government stepped in and had the idea that much of this land could be converted for agricultural purposes. Drainage ditches were constructed and wet areas were drained.

Up until the 1930's much of the State Forest was divided into farmsteads. The regions sandy soils did not make for good crop production and one by one most of the farmers were forced into bankruptcy. Once again the federal government stepped in and provided assistance to the area farmers by purchasing their lands and resettling them on richer farmlands.

Once most of the lands were under federal ownership the government began the task of restoring the landscape. The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) were brought in to plant trees, improve wildlife habitat, and create recreational areas. The Castle Mound campground and recreational area were created during this time as a roadside park. The CCC's craftsmanship can still be seen at the shelter building and stone entrance wall at Castle Mound.

The Dike 17 wildlife area was also created during this time. Drainage ditches were plugged and wooden dams were constructed with spillways. Areas that had been drained for farming were put back into a wetland condition to attract waterfowl.

From the 1930's until 1955 administration of the area was shared between the federal government and state of Wisconsin. In 1955 the federal government transferred 59,000 acres to the Wisconsin Conservation Department. On July 1st 1957 the area was officially designated a State Forest.

If you travel throughout the forest you can still find clues about its past history. Foundations of old farm buildings remain in many parts of the forest. Remnant lilacs and tiger lilies often remain near old homesteads. Old railroad grades that once carried cut

logs to busy sawmills are still readily visible. The remnants of old logging camps still can be detected by a trained eye.

The Black River State Forest has a rich history in need of recording. If you have historical pictures or articles on the state forest you would be willing to donate please contact us at the number below. In the coming months there will be events to celebrate our 50th anniversary. Future columns will provide more information on these.

If you have any questions about this article or the State Forest please call us at (715) 284-1403.